

# BY DESIGN

## Getting ready for calving

by Reinaldo Cooke, Texas A&M University



Ranchers recognize the importance of assisting and caring for dams and their offspring during the calving season.

Calving assistance, however, requires proper equipment and facilities that provide safety for cattle and people. Cows in labor and the assisting crew should always have access to calving areas containing all the resources required for assisted or unassisted births.

Well-designed facilities will increase the motivation of the crew to move cattle into the calving area and to provide assistance without needless stress. The calving area should be familiar to cattle; feeding them in or near this area prior to calving will help.

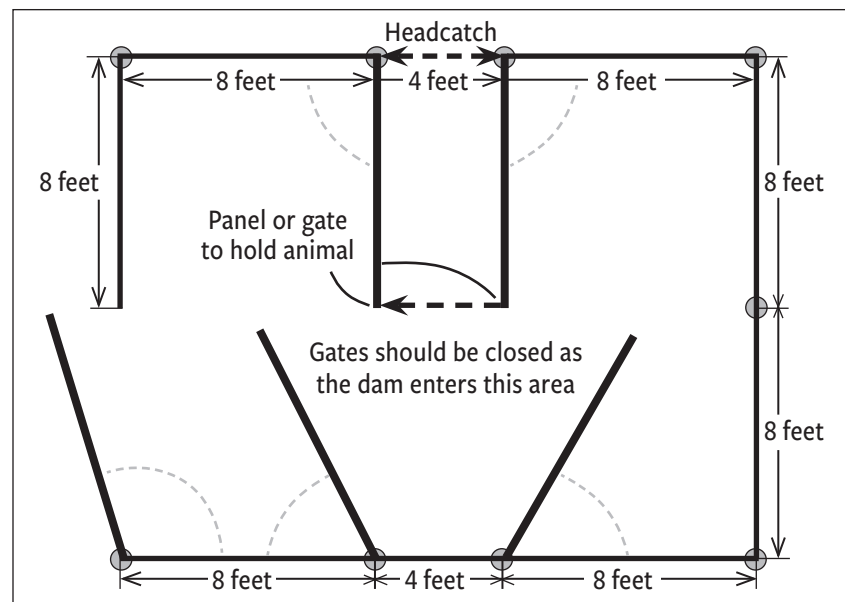
A concrete pad will allow the area to be swept and will prevent excessive mud, while a floor drain can be built to remove birth fluids. Concrete areas should be bedded as bare concrete can be slippery to the cattle and crew.

A floodlight above and behind the animal will help with calving assistance and create a better environment than working in the dark.

### The calving area

The use of hinged, swing-away, or interchangeable gates/panels will ensure flexibility in designing and moving cattle into the calving area (see Fig. 1). A headcatch will provide access to dams that require assistance. Panels/gates should flank both sides of the headcatch

Fig. 1: Example calving area floor plan



to facilitate moving the dam into the catch, and restrain them comfortably. A panel (or gate) should be placed behind the dam as she enters the headcatch. Once assistance begins, this back panel should swing away so the dam can lie down during the birth process. Panels can also be used to form a small pen to hold the dam and newborn calf and encourage the bonding process.

The headcatch needs to have straight side bars and open all the way to the floor so the dam can lie down. The area in front of the headcatch needs to be well-lit to facilitate movement and dam restraint. After calving, the dam should have plenty of space to back out of the headcatch, turn around with her head down and start bonding with the calf. Only move pairs to a new location after bonding is complete. Otherwise this process can be threatened.

To accommodate C-sections, the gate to the left of the dam should be cut horizontally in half so the top

section can swing away from the dam. The bottom section of the gate should stay in place during the C-section to prevent potential crew injuries (i.e., kicking), but can be opened after calving to allow nursing

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assistance. A squeeze chute can be used for calving assistance, but the dam should not be able to lie down in the chute. Boards or belts can be used to hold the dam up.

### Bottom line

Calving facilities need to provide a safe, comfortable and clean environment to cattle and the assistance crew. Such resources will result in healthier calves and cows that rebreed more easily, promoting cattle welfare and profitability in cow-calf ranches. |

Editor's note: "By Design" is a regular column of the *Angus Beef Bulletin* featuring facility and homestead design for cattlemen. Reinaldo Cooke is a professor of beef cattle production at Texas A&M University.